

Duxbury town moderator praised for fairness, humor PEOPLE A-F

By Robert Knox
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In the small Maine town where Allen Bornheimer grew up, people said there had to be something wrong with you if you didn't go to Town Meeting.

Profile When he moved to Duxbury 38 years ago, he found lots of other people felt the same way. Bornheimer has been Town Moderator in Duxbury for 26 years.

Unlike some suburban communities that have given up New England's original form of participatory democracy, Duxbury has clung to the traditional Open Town Meeting, in which all registered voters are created equal, free to speak and vote. For the Open Town Meeting to be successful, the role of moderator — the system's front man — is essential.

The moderator relies on common sense, experience, and good judgment, said Bornheimer, who was recently praised in a resolution by selectmen for his "wisdom, fairness, and humor, in times of prosperity and hardship." He's the person who has to call time, follow the rules, move things along, and give everyone the impression that he or she is being treated the same way as everyone else in town.

"Allen does a great job in managing Town Meeting," said former Selectman John Tuffy. "I don't think I have any sense of how Allen feels about articles. He's certainly even-handed and very patient, and he respects the process."

Tuffy also praised Bornheimer's work on committee appointments, saying he strives to balance points of view on important town committees such as the Finance Committee. "One of the reasons these committees are taken as seriously as they are is they are reflective of the community," said Tuffy.

Even those who don't go to Town Meeting in Duxbury recognize the process as fair, Bornheimer said.

"You have some recourse," he said. "You can come and try to persuade your neighbors. If the majority prevails, then that's the way God intended it."

While "it's not the most efficient form of government," Bornheimer said, the quality of the system's decision making is good. "I think the decisions reflect by and large the aspirations and the attitudes and the goals of the people who are affected by them."

Town Meeting works because the people who come to the meetings not only talk, they're willing to listen, learn, and be influenced when they see neighbors they respect take a certain position, he said.

After all, Bornheimer said, "There are a lot of smart people in Duxbury."

Bornheimer, 65, a graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Law, worked for many years as an attorney for Choate, Hall & Stewart in Boston, a corporate practice that at times placed him at the right hand of the chairman at board meetings. He is currently a principal in Cargex Properties Inc., a company that develops and owns commercial real estate.

With his legal and business background, after first serving on the town's Finance Committee, Bornheimer saw the moderator as a role "where I could add value. I could make a contribution."

Bornheimer said he relies on common sense and consistent application of simple

rules to run Town Meeting, a community stockholder meeting with a fixed agenda but an unpredictable script that sometimes surprises. Residents line up at the public microphones with pages of notes in their hands to speak on hot issues. Voters do research, they prepare their remarks, they take notes when others are speaking. They bring expertise from their professional spheres.

They can take strong positions on controversial issues — and sometimes can be pretty evenly divided.

Bornheimer learned this the first year he took the gavel and found himself in the hot seat. In the face of a gypsy moth explosion, a move was afoot to save the town's trees by spraying them with a chemical bug killer, a cure some thought would be worse than the disease.

Many people spoke at a packed special meeting attended by hundreds, and a vote to stop the spraying won by two votes, Bornheimer recalled. Someone moved for a reconsideration; Bornheimer permitted the motion. More debate followed and this time the proposal to stop spraying lost by two votes.

After 26 years, Bornheimer still believes townspeople should attend Town Meeting rather than watch it on TV. Not all town business is controversial or exciting, and long meetings tax listening skills and wear out fannies.

He balances the need for full presentations on complicated measures with the limits of human patience, Bornheimer said. "I encourage them to be succinct." When debates grow long, he asks speakers not to repeat points already made, "even if you can say it better than the last person."

The moderator judges Town Meeting decisions, too. A voice vote is much quicker than a standing count, but if even "one person is uncomfortable" with his judgment call on a voice vote, Bornheimer said, he'll call for a count.

The moderator also appoints certain committees, a means of bringing new talent

into town government. Finding new participants from the town's younger generations is one of the job's challenges, Bornheimer said, but also a source of satisfaction.

"This time of the year if friends see me coming, they go to the other side of the street," he said. A conversation on town business might end up with a three-year committee appointment. A number of his appointments later became selectmen, including current board member Betsy Sullivan and former member John Tuffy.

Running for re-election — an annual obligation — also keeps him in touch with people who are active in town government, Bornheimer said, even this year when he ran unopposed and was elected last week to his 27th term.



ON TOWN MEETING

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intended it," says Allen Bornheimer.



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Last week, Allen Bornheimer was elected to his 27th term as Duxbury town moderator, a post that requires common sense and patience.